



Natomas Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Joe Pereira

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Interviewer: Joaquin Pereira

Transcriber: Anne Ofsink

Center for Sacramento History

551 Sequoia Pacific Blvd

Sacramento, CA 95811-0229

(916) 808-7072

csh@cityofsacramento.org

www.centerforsacramentohistory.org

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This is not a verbatim transcript. Parts of the interview have been paraphrased.

Joaquin Pereira: I am with my brother Joe Pereira. He is in town at this time visiting from Baltimore, Maryland. He has some memories of living in the Natomas area and who his friends were. Joe, I'm going to ask some of the questions that they suggest. What language was spoken in your home when you were growing up?

Joe Pereira: This is Joe Pereira. I was born in Sacramento, California, and we moved to the Natomas District in 1941 when my mom married Tony Souza. At that time, I started first grade at the Jefferson School in Natomas. Then I went to school there till the eighth grade.

In the first grade, I was with Ronald Costa and that's one of the pals of mine, and Larry Taxera. In second grade, that was 1942, there was my neighbor, a very dear classmate — Jean Shimada was her name. The American government took them off their farm and put them in a concentration camp at this time. Also, my other friend, who we used to run around and catch swallows from their nests, his name was Alfred Onodero. He used to live on the far edge. He also was taken away. They never did come back during my school days at Jefferson School.

I went there to the fourth grade and then we transferred from the fourth grade into the big room, which was known as Jefferson School. The amount of students from the first to the eighth grade equaled to approximately 60 students. The big room had the fifth to the eighth grade. My teachers there for the first grade was Mrs. Thomas and then the teacher from the fifth to the eighth was Mrs. Mack. Shortly thereafter came Mrs. Davidson. She was from Alabama. One day a black student tried to enroll and she said it was illegal for him to enroll. I think his name was Shadrack. He, during all this time, while people were trying to find out if it was legal or not legal, this person Shadrack did not come back to school. Then after Mrs. Davidson quit, which was a couple — maybe she stayed there two years — come Mrs. Perall[?]. Yeah, Mrs. Perall, she asked me, when I was in sixth grade, what a compass was. I didn't know, so she paddled me on the rear with a paddle with holes in it, which left marks. That was a form of abuse — in these days it would be, but it wasn't then. Then the next teachers from there were Mr. and Mrs. Dahm. Mrs. Dahm was the fourth grade teacher and Mr. Dahm was the teacher from the fifth to the eighth grade. He got Jefferson School involved in all kinds of sports, like basketball, football, and it was fun to go to school then.

Then I graduated the eighth grade with Larry Taxera, Darlene Newton, Wayne Price, Gary Westby, and John Davidson. The only person I have seen from that day on was Darlene Newton. I seen her in 1962 and haven't seen her since, or any of the other fellows. Then I went to Grant Union High School, graduated in '54, and I'm here for my 45th anniversary of graduation.

[00:05:55]

I live in Baltimore, Maryland. I am retired from the Federal government, which consisted of 14 years with the Department of Defense and 16 years with the Social Security Administration. I took an early retirement which was a riff[?], and then I got my home improvement license and started doing contract work, and was unhappy with all of the paperwork plus licenses and insurances, and I really didn't want to go at it full blast, and it really wasn't worth doing. I am currently working for a dredging company. It is

a United States-wide outfit, but currently I've been two years in a chemical environment taking the residue from different chemicals, taking the water out, which is called dewatering, and making a solid waste, which goes into the landfill. That's it for now. Thank you.

[00:07:35]

Joaquin: Joe, did you know Donald when you were going to grammar school?

Joe: Yes.

Joaquin: Were they a prominent family out there?

Joe: Is that thing still going?

Joaquin: Yes, it's still going, but they aren't going to pick up everything. Some of the families that you knew were Japanese. The Japanese disappeared during the war.

Joe: Right.

Joaquin: Because they had to go to concentration camps. Do you think that was a good idea?

Joe: No. Why didn't they do the Germans? You couldn't tell the Germans. An oriental is an oriental — you can't tell who is who. I can, because I know Japanese.

Joaquin: When you were in the service you went to Japan. You can talk Japanese.

Joe: Right.

Joaquin: They were nice people, huh?

Joe: Right.

[00:08:51]

Joaquin: What did you do for entertainment? You went to the show once a week, or what?

Joe: Oh yes. I used to have to walk all the way in to the show. I went once a year, not once a week. [Laughter] That was providing that we did all our chores for the year. Which was clearing up all that pruning in the orchard.

Joaquin: How did you ever go to the show out at Del Paso Theatre and win a radio?

Joe: That was when I was staying over with Chris. I went over and visited Chris. You were with Halstroms, or whatever, and I went to the movie with Lee Halstrom.

Joaquin: Oh.

Joe: I kept my ticket. They called my ticket number.

[00:09:47]

Joaquin: Do you remember that we used to make wine out there in Natomas?

Joe: Yeah.

Joaquin: About how many gallons did our family make a year, do you know?

Joe: At least a thousand gallons.

Joaquin: Well then, in order to make a thousand gallons, you had to have somebody else sign—

Joe: Well, it was 300 gallons per person. You was on there, Rose was on there. I was on there. You didn't have to be 21 to have that 300 gallons.

Joaquin: Did you ever visit the wine cellar very much?

Joe: I used to sneak it out all the time.

Joaquin: What were some of your chores that you did?

Joe: I had to milk cows every morning. I had to feed the pigs, too. That was before I went to school, and that was at nine-years-old.

[00:12:15]

Joaquin: Did you have a bus that would take you to school?

Joe: Yeah, in high school. We had to walk all the way to Jefferson School, which was about a mile.

Joaquin: While we were out there, did any of the roads ever flood?

Joe: The only time there was a big flood was in 1950 — uh, let's see — that did Yuba City and all of them. Let's see, that was 1952 probably around there. Ronald Costa and I used to patrol the area around there. That's when Fitzpatrick worked for District 1000 water department.

Joaquin: Most of the people, they spoke English, but there was a lot of Portuguese. Was there any German people that you know of? Not many Chinese people.

Joe: No. Not in the area, no. There was more Japanese. The only Chinese there was, was way up there by Raley's, by Northgate.

Joaquin: And the Garden Highway. Did we get along good with the Chinese and the Japanese?

Joe: Everybody got along good in those days.

[00:14:56]

Joaquin: How about the city of Sacramento, did they give a lot of trouble to the farmers? You know, make them obey laws like not burning anything.

Joe: No, you could always burn. We used to burn all of the orchard stuff. That was the days when you used to burn the stubble.

Joaquin: Hey, what did our family do for entertainment, Joe? I remember we played cards.

Joe: Played cards and drank wine. *[Laughter]* I did — I don't know about you.

Joaquin: Well, I didn't drink any wine, but I used to play cards. What was that game we used to play?

Joe: Hearts, and guts, poker.

Joaquin: That was in the wintertime. In the wintertime, didn't we repair the equipment, like the tractor and other things?

Joe: No, we didn't have that environment.

[00:15:59]

Joaquin: When our tractor broke down, what happened to it? Was it Joe Frickle[?] that came around?

Joe: Yes, he was one of the mechanics. We didn't have that many breakdowns.

Joaquin: I couldn't remember where Sleeper's was. There was a beach out there.

Joe: Yes.

Joaquin: Now it's a city park. What did we call that thing, do you remember?

Joe: I don't remember, but we used to go down there once in a while. I used to go down there in the daytime to get a suntan.

Joaquin: *[Laughter]* There wasn't very many people who went there, huh?

Joe: There was there for a while. Sometimes. We had a couple of parties over there.

Joaquin: Weenie roasts and things.

Joe: I don't know. I don't remember too much of them.

Joaquin: Did you know Mr. Sleeper?

Joe: No, I didn't know him, but I knew of him.

Joaquin: Well our stepbrother, Tony Souza, lived in one of his old houses.

Joe: Yeah, Tony Souza did. Junior.

Joaquin: He had one favorite dog. What was his name?

Joe: I don't know. [*It was Diaz.*]

[00:17:41]

Joaquin: So for entertainment, mostly we would go to the show. I went to the show more times than you did. I went about once every two or three weeks and saw a good movie. But you didn't go as often.

Joe: I had to walk to downtown. How did you get there?

Joaquin: Sometimes my stepfather would take me and sometimes I would walk. It was about three miles. We could walk it. It seemed like only 15 minutes but I know it was really about a half an hour. We used to walk pretty fast. We lived on Orchard Lane near the Garden Highway. We could cut across fields — that's why we could make it faster.

Joe: Yes, we used to go through Fitzpatrick's yard.

Joaquin: Fitzpatrick's yard and Riverview Orchard.

Joe: We'd cut right down, kittywompus right through there, and go through Christophel's place and then go Sal's place, which was Silva, and then we'd cut through Christophel's Orchard again.

Joaquin: Who were our neighbors? Candida Rosa was our neighbor?

Joe: Yes, Candida was on the northern side, and then western side was the Zamedas, and Jack Silva, and that's the only people who were around there.

[00:19:32]

Joaquin: In those days, was that considered flood zone or was it considered—

Joe: It wasn't no flood zone, just farms. I remember when the sheepherder used to bring sheep through there. Then we would — all of the little lambs that the ewes would drop — Josephine and Rose, which is my sisters, we'd get them and then bottle feed them.

Joaquin: The sheepherder didn't want them?

Joe: Well, if they couldn't keep up with the flock, they stayed.

Joaquin: So they just left them, huh?

Joe: Yes, they were left to die. If you can remember correctly, they used to go through there with a bunch of sheep right down there—

Joaquin: Orchard Lane.

Joe: Yes, Orchard Lane, but it wasn't called Orchard Lane in those days.

Joaquin: Yeah, I forgot what it was. Wouldn't the Costa family — the Costa family was well known and they were hard workers, too. How many Costas were there?

Joe: Yes. Four boys: Richard, Ronald, Billy, and Teddy.

Joaquin: You were Ronald's age.

Joe: Ronald and I was in the first grade together. He stayed back in the second grade because he had polio.

Joaquin: I didn't know polio was prevalent in those days.

Joe: That was when they started vaccinating — well, I don't know if it was when they started vaccinating, but Ronald had polio.

[00:21:29]

Joaquin: Did you belong to any clubs at all?

Joe: I belonged to 4-H Club later on.

Joaquin: Where did they meet?

Joe: American Basin.

Joaquin: Oh, at the school?

Joe: Yes.

Joaquin: Was there very many kids that went to that?

Joe: Yes, there were quite a few kids.

Joaquin: Did you have very many activities that the 4-H put on?

Joe: We had camp one year in Lake Tahoe.

Joaquin: Oh. Some of the times, did you play cards, dance? Did you socialize with other people?

Joe: I don't remember that. It was just one of them things. There was no entertainment in them days. You got to listen to the radio and then TVs come out. We bought a TV in 1948 or 1949.

[00:23:00]

Joaquin: Joe, in our family, we were different than any other family. I know my mom made me speak to her in Portuguese all the time. Did you have to speak in Portuguese to Mom?

Joe: Well, that was the only way she understood.

Joaquin: You mean mom didn't know how to speak English?

Joe: She couldn't speak English.

Joaquin: What were some of the things our parents instilled into us? Did they try to tell us—

Joe: You don't work, you don't eat.

Joaquin: [*Laughter*] You don't work, you don't eat. Well, still think the old families believe that. Tell me, Joe, did you know of any families in the district who were on welfare?

Joe: Nobody.

Joaquin: Even the poorest people, they worked? Or what?

Joe: There was nobody on welfare.

Joaquin: No.

Joe: There was one guy that went to school with us, Paul Eagle. I don't know where the hell he come from, but he lived over on Bannon Street.

Joaquin: Oh. Well, Bannon Street—

Joe: Was District 1000.

Joaquin: Yeah, well—

Joe: That's where Ed Sadder's[?] little grocery store was there.

Joaquin: That was on Jibboom Street. Ed Sadder's store was on Jibboom Street.

Joe: Where is Bannon Street at?

Joaquin: Bannon Street is on the other side of the River, but Bannon Creek is — oh, I know where Paul Eagle lived on Bannon Street, which was on the other side of the River.

Joe: Yeah, but there was a store there.

Joaquin: There was a store.

Joe: That was Bannon Street.

Joaquin: Further on was Thomas Richards Cannery, Bercut-Richards.

Joe: Yes. Right. I used to drive a truck there with no license. [*Laughter*]

[00:25:08]

Joaquin: Joe, do you know where they got the name Bannon Street.

Joe: I never heard of Bannon Creek.

Joaquin: Oh, it was a creek that went through there where Paul Shimada lives right now in that subdivision. It was just a little creek. It must have got its name — on the other side of the river, there was a Bannon Street. I don't know how Bannon Street got its name.

Joe: I don't know.

Joaquin: Do you know of any roads that existed in the old days that are not there now? [*Laughter*] Oh, you don't even know what's there now.

Joe: No.

Joaquin: Miller Road used to be where San Juan Road is now. Jack Perry's son Joaquin Perry lives on that Miller Road. Did any of the students that went to Jefferson School or American Basin become famous?

Joe: Not that I knew of.

Joaquin: [*Laughter*]

Joe: One of them held up a place — he was famous. [*Laughter*]

Joaquin: Who was that?

Joe: Gary Parks

Joaquin: Oh, Gary Parks.

Joe: Don't you remember when he was in the service, he held up a bar and shot in the roof.

Joaquin: He got in a lot of trouble. Yes. I remember hearing about that.

Joe: Well, he was in the service with you wasn't he?

Joaquin: Yeah.

Joe: They threw him out then. It was in the paper.

Joaquin: I know his dad worked for the electric company. SMUD.

Joe: Then Bill Page, my brother-in-law, you remember — with Gary Parks also. I remember they come down and stole some of the old man's wine. They ran off into Christophel's place.

Joaquin: Where Frank Freitas is now. They ran off to where Orchard Lane makes a T to Garden Highway.

Joe: Yes. What was the guy's name?

Joaquin: Gary Parks was driving.

Joe: Was it Gary Parks?

Joaquin: Well, don't know.

Joe: A guy named Slaboda[?].

Joaquin: I don't know. I heard about it.

Joe: I was talking with Bill afterwards. I heard the dogs barking. I went out with a 25/35. I heard somebody drive away. Then you guys, the next day, you guys went through the damn stop up there.

[00:28:20]

Joaquin: Did you know anything about Frank Freitas or anything? Was he one of the bigger farmers out there?

Joe: Not that much.

Joaquin: In those days, did they have that Interstate 5 highway going through Sacramento?

Joe: Only road to Sacramento was the I Street bridge. Then they had the hobos under that bridge. Rob Costa, and Richard, and I used to bombard the hobos down there because they had tin roofs.

Joaquin: Oh.

Joe: We'd throw rocks down there, make shit.

Joaquin: That was harassing.

Joe: Them were hobos in them days. I mean, they were the friendly type.

Joaquin: Now the homeless type are—

Joe: Now everybody is a hobo. Homeless.

Joaquin: Do you think it is a good idea that the farmland be put into houses like they're doing right now, subdividing it all up so that everybody can—

Joe: They ought to get the badlands.

Joaquin: You mean the lands that don't grow any crops?

Joe: Right.

Joaquin: Yeah, isn't it a shame. Why do you think they are putting houses in Natomas area when they got hardpan land which isn't fertile to build on? What's the reason for them using that ground? I don't know. You think it is because the location? It is close to the capital.

Joe: That is definitely why.

Joaquin: The proximity to the state capital and downtown.

Joe: Sure.

[00:30:21]

Joaquin: Do you think there is anything you can add to the history of Natomas that you think might be important when they transcribe this? Is there any unusual things that you think made Natomas become different than any other place? Did the people out there — did the ethnic groups stick together only with their own kind?

Joe: Everybody associated with everybody. The only people that didn't associate with anybody were the Chinese — they were individuals. They would talk with you if you talked with them, but they didn't associate.

Joaquin: Do you know of any outstanding things that was done for the area? Did the Natomas Company charge people to pump water out of the canals?

Joe: No, they charge you for the irrigation system, which was put in effect way back in 1919, somewhere around there. There was no visual ditch that they were assessing you for.

Joaquin: Do you know if on the ranch we lived on, did the Natomas Company have a right of way to go through our property because at one time they had a ditch there?

Joe: That's what I'm talking about.

Joaquin: Then it was recorded against the cropper?

Joe: Yeah. But now you get them other ditches for the 25 acres, they had a ditch there. That's where you had to make a request when you needed their irrigation water. The other one that came out of the canal over there, we had our own pump. We were responsible for our pump — if someone stole it, if it burned up, you had to pay for the ditch.

[00:33:24]

Joaquin: Joe Pereira, why did you choose to move off of the farm when you had an opportunity to farm that property on a sharecrop basis. What was the reason you left the farm?

Joe: Too much hard work.

Joaquin: [Laughter]

Joe: Well, it's just like — I didn't even want to be a carpenter from building those buildings out there. Gradually, as I got older and got into it — that's what I ended up doing a few years.

Joaquin: Joe, do you think people living in the city made more money by the hour than what you could make on the farm?

Joe: In them days there was no automation. When I was brought up on the farm, you had to do most of it by hand.

Joaquin: What kind of equipment did we have when we were on the farm? Did we have horses and plows? Did we have other things?

Joe: Well, we had gasoline-operated tractors. An old '30 that would suck up 5 gallons of gas an hour. Then we had little rubber-tired jobs, then a harvester that we would use. It looked like junkyard city there.

Joaquin: Do you know what the price of land was in that area about the time you were getting into high school?

Joe: About \$1,000 an acre. Little Tony sold his to Jack Silva, but he'd borrowed so much money on it by then.

[00:36:05]

Joaquin: That was when you were going to high school. Do you think some of the farmers made some money those days compared to farmers now?

Joe: Farmers in them days made money because they were conservative. There was no "this vacation this," or vacation then. They grew their own food. Their diet was limited. No lobster. [Laughter]

Joaquin: Did we have to go to the store to buy meat or—

Joe: The only thing we bought from the store was bread and sugar. Actually, when I had to take lunches to school, I just didn't feel comfortable with a French bread sandwich with a pork chop stuffed in it, a steak in it, or a great big piece of sausage. I used to trade my lunch a lot for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a bologna sandwich, which, nowadays, I realize is garbage.

Joaquin: Did mom used to bake her own bread?

Joe: No, she never baked bread. We used to have the baker come down and deliver. I remember when I was a kid I used to go up and say, "Do you have any little breads today?" He'd give me one of those little Portuguese rolls. We used to buy — he would come once a week and we would buy bread for the whole week, which was quite a bit of bread.

Joaquin: In those days, did they have people that used to come out to the farm and sell their wares?

Joe: Yeah, there used to be a bootlegger come down there and sell the old man a gallon of brandy here and there. [laughter]

Joaquin: Was bootlegging more prevalent in those days?

Joe: They'd made it a point to have a still. I don't know. Some people like that moonshine.

[00:38:54]

Joaquin: Do you think being brought up out on the farm was good for you, or would it have been better to be raised up in the city like they do now? Do you think it kept you from being a juvenile delinquent? Do you think if you were brought up in the city, like Sacramento, or Oak Park, or Gardenland, where they have a lot of people living, would be the thing that keeps teenagers from getting into trouble?

Joe: Well the people you hang with is what gets you in trouble. Now, I'm a proven person to that. When I started going to high school, Grant Union, I kind of was a wayward-type person. I never went to jail or anything like that. I was a mean delinquent. I hung with the wrong troops. I was smarter than they were. They went to jail and I didn't.

Joaquin: You knew your limits then, huh? Do you think by working real hard, it did keep you out of trouble?

Joe: I don't know. When you work hard, it makes you want to get the hell out of there. I didn't want to bust my tail my whole life.

Joaquin: If you would have stayed on the farm, do you think you would have had a bright future at all, or it was just so dismal that you wanted to get out?

Joe: No, no. I just didn't get along with Tony.

Joaquin: Our stepfather.

Joe: You didn't neither.

Joaquin: I know I didn't see eye to eye with him.

Joe: That's why he was gone.

[00:41:21]

Joaquin: What are some of the good things that were instilled into you that created your life to be more meaningful. I know we had catechism with the Catholic school after hours at Jefferson School. I don't know if they still did when you were going to school. Did you end up having to go to catechism after hours?

Joe: Catechism, you mean the services? The priest who represented the Catholic Church wasn't a good priest.

Joaquin: Was he an Irishman?

Joe: I don't know what nationality he was, but I can remember he had an old 1941 Hudson. If you were out of line, he would make you bend over backwards and stuff like that.

Joaquin: Can you think of anything else that would be helpful in learning how people lived in the Natomas area prior to the 1950s, '54, or even after that? Do you think that a lot of the laws that they passed in the city were beneficial to people in the farm community?

Joe: When they made it the city, you couldn't afford to be a farmer. All of the taxation ran the farmers out to start with.

[00:43:40]

Joaquin: It has really been interesting to talk with you. We have lived a pretty good life after all. A lot of the work we did didn't hurt us that much, but at that time, the work seemed like drudgery. Maybe that

made us smart, getting off the farm and working for the government, you and I. Your career was with the government and so was mine. It must have prepared us for that kind of work. Thanks a lot brother Joe. We're both middle-aged now. You are, what — 62?

Joe: 63

Joaquin: 63 and I'm 67. This is the perspective that you have from two middle-aged, male government employees that used to be raised out on the farm. Thank you very much Joe. Bye.